Plain Talk

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Getting Plain Talk Started

Are you developing a Plain Talk initiative at your agency? If so, here are:

Answers to frequently asked questions

Stories about how three different Washington agencies set up their programs:

- Revising High-Volume Form Letters
- Developing a Plain Talk Review "Team"
- Revising Letters to Generate Tax Revenue

Frequently asked questions

What is Plain Talk?

Plain Talk is a way of communicating that makes it easy for people to do business with us. Documents written in Plain Talk include:

- Short sentences.
- Words and phrasing commonly used by the intended audience.
- Only the information needed by the recipient, presented in a logical sequence.
- Active voice, that makes it clear who is responsible for what.
- Layout and design that help the reader find key information easily. This includes adequate white space, bulleted lists, helpful headings and other proven techniques.

Why is the Governor focusing on Plain Talk?

Governor Gregoire's management agenda is two-pronged:

1. Improve management and accountability of government programs.
2. Make it easier for citizens to do business with us.

The Government, Management, Accountability and Performance (GMAP) forums will address the first item. Plain Talk is aimed at the second.

The public's experience of us is highly dependent on how we communicate with them. Citizens have a right to access government services easily and quickly, and clearly written materials make it easier for them to do that. If the letters, applications, brochures and other documents we use are confusing and bureaucratic, it makes it difficult for them to do business with us.

Plain Talk is also good business: clearly written instructions and applications make it easier for people to comply with regulations and carry out their end of the relationship. This saves time and money for us, as well as them.

Will all agencies have to do Plain Talk?

Yes. If you distribute any kind of written materials, you will be expected to make sure those materials are easy for the recipient to understand. You will have latitude to determine how you prioritize items to be rewritten and how you structure the initiative in your agency.

What's the role of an agency leader in Plain Talk?

Creating documents in plain language is harder than many people think. They can break tradition, sometimes require legal consultations, and may affect deeply entrenched program procedures. Also, ‘Foggy communications’ are often the result of ‘foggy policies.’

The direction must come from the top or it won’t get done. Managers can set the tone through encouraging messages and regular updates in the agency newsletters. Projects are energized by awards for “best rewrites,’ which are tangible and entertaining.

How will Plain Talk help an agency achieve its mission?

Agencies that have adopted Plain Talk programs report that the return on the investment is VERY significant. Labor and Industries decreased staff time spent on questions or complaints. Revenue’s collections from improvements to one letter alone increased revenues by over $1,000,000. Ecology staff found the revised templates were much more convenient for them and their customers.

What will agencies be expected to do?

1. In general, we will expect agencies to:
2. Assign someone to lead the agency’s Plain Talk initiative.
3. Provide training for the lead in the principles of Plain Talk..
4. Identify the agency communications that are not consistent with Plain Talk - including letters, press releases, templates, brochures, instructions, applications, forms and guidelines.
5. Prioritize documents to be rewritten.
6. Establish a schedule for rewriting materials, then track and report progress.
7. When ‘foggy letters’ reveal ‘foggy policies,’ allocate management time as needed to clarify policy intent.
8. Test the readability of documents with typical recipients, as time allows.
9. As new communications are created, write them using the principles of Plain Talk.
10. Incorporate Plain Talk principles into employee orientation and training.

What are we expected to “Plain Talk” first?

Plain Talk is focused on:

- Individual citizens.
- Small businesses.
- Critical service providers, such as physicians and other health and safety professionals.

In other words, we are focused on those people with the fewest resources or the greatest need to understand their rights and benefits – those who need access to information without a time-consuming and expensive effort.

The Plain Talk Initiative will focus first on written documents that those people use, such as instructions, collections letters, or summaries that explain laws, policies, customer rights or benefits. Though many of the Plain Talk principles can be applied to forms, rules and web sites, the specific training and information you will receive won't involve those types of projects at the beginning.

Do we have to “Plain Talk” all of my agency’s documents immediately?

Agencies often own thousands of documents, so you must use your best judgment when deciding how to approach this challenge. You may select groups of letters from particular programs that tend to cause the most customer confusion. Or, you may wish to establish a system for having troublesome (or new) documents revised by a trained "Plain Talk team" within your agency. Select projects you believe will make a difference.

How does Plain Talk fit with agency Public Information offices?

Clearly, an agency’s Plain Talk effort should be coordinated with the work of the agency’s public information office. In some agencies, we would expect the Plain Talk lead to be a public information officer. But the work assignment is the agency’s responsibility based on interest and workload. Many communication officers find that a Plain Talk initiative can validate their efforts to simplify bureaucratic or regulatory language.

Who should be our Plain Talk lead?

Your Plain Talk lead should be someone who:

- Models the principles of Plain Talk in his/her own communications
- Is effective in leading and managing people toward a shared goal
- Is interested in and enthusiastic about the opportunity
- Works effectively with the Public Information office (if not part of it)

Where can we find training?

Several agencies, including Labor and Industries (L&I), Ecology and Revenue have already adopted Plain Talk or a variation of it. They have generously shared expertise and materials with all of us on this web site. Dana Botka from L&I will be teaching the first round of classes for agency Plain Talk leads in July through DOP. As we identify other training needs for agency staff, Mary Campbell will work with DOP and internal and external experts in the topic to offer open-enrollment courses.

What resources will we find on this Plain Talk website?

Dana Botka has worked with Janet Shimabukuro from Revenue and Bari Schreiner from Ecology to compile:

- Clear writing guidelines.
- Plain Talk material from agencies that have implemented the program.
- Information about how to implement a program in your agency.
- Sample before/after letters .
- Link to DOP's Plain Talk training schedule
- Links to other resources

What other support is available?

We will be holding monthly Plain Talk network meetings so that leads can share what they've learned and ask questions.

Does every agency have to implement the program in the same way?

No. Different agencies and programs use different types of documents. Agencies and programs should focus their Plain Talk revision efforts on the documents that will provide the most 'bang for the buck.' All other things being equal, it makes more sense to revise a document that goes to 10,000 people than one that only goes to 10,or a document that generates multiple calls for clarification over one that nobody ever complains about.

How will we track our accomplishments?

Track them the same way that your management team tracks (or will track) progress toward other agency goals. We suggest that you take some baseline measures, so that you can assess the impact of the program. Plain Talk leads will receive more information on this question at our regular meetings.

Our staff just see this as 'one more thing' they have to do!

That is a natural reaction to change. Changing the way we do things often requires a commitment of time and attention to 'reprogram' our responses. In a demanding work environment, asking people to change their writing style will be seen 'one more thing' by some people. But others do, in fact, find it liberating that they can now just 'say what they mean.'

Is Plain Talk just going to 'dumb down' our documents?

No! Language does not have to be complicated to be accurate and complete. Our aim is not to impress people with our erudition – our documents must make it easy for them to understand what we are saying and what they need to do. It is a sign of respect to use terms that are clear and understandable with our customers, rather than those that are overly complicated or vague.

Does Plain Talk dilute our regulatory authority?

Absolutely not. In fact, documents written in Plain Talk can be just as direct and unequivocal as documents written in ‘legalese.’ In fact, some regulatory agencies have found that compliance rates INCREASE when documents are revised in Plain Talk. The Office of the Attorney General will be helping us as we learn more about plain language.

How many revisions are we expected to do?

That depends on how many need to be revised. Just as there is no ‘cookie cutter’ approach to an agency’s program, there is no magic number of revisions. We expect agencies to identify and prioritize materials that need to be revised, to integrate the effort into other management priorities, and to allocate resources accordingly.

What if we don’t have anything that needs to be revised?

If you believe that all of your agency communications are already written in Plain Talk, contact Mary Campbell to explore the possibility of using some of your materials as examples...or some of your staff as mentors for other agencies!

Getting Plain Talk Started

Example A
Revising High-Volume Form Letters

Here's a process that was used by the Department of Labor and Industries when it selected and rewrote 100 high-volume form letters as an agency initiative in 2001-02.

1. Choose your agency lead

Your lead should have good communications skills and have experience managing complex, agency-wide projects. People with down-to-earth styles and common-sense management skills should do well with Plain Talk. The role does not require extensive training or experience as a writer. But the lead should be able to tell good writing from bad and be interested in the subject.

2. Set the tone at the top executive level

Creating plain language documents is hard work. They can affect deeply entrenched program traditions, require legal consultations and sometimes require agencies to re-think their policies. The direction must come from the top or it won't get done.

3. Provide initial training (available through DOP)

The Department of Personnel is offering three, two-day Plain Talk classes for agency Plain Talk leads in July (they are now filled). These classes are focused on planning a document, writing guidelines, Group Write techniques, usability testing and shepherding a Plain Talk revision through a large organization. Later, DOP plans to incorporate some of these subjects into its ongoing writing classes. Contact Colleen Bray for more information.

4. Inventory your agency's form letters or other frequently used documents

Have the director or a top executive direct all program managers develop a list all high-volume documents and how often they are used.

5. Prioritize your rewrite projects

Once the inventory is complete, have your programs take stock of what they're sending to customers. Choose the troublesome documents your program staff members say cause the most problems. Use common sense and target the worst ones first for a rewrite, particularly if they are used in high volumes.

6. Assign writers and subject-matter experts

Assign an accountable staff member to each document. Who does the assigning will depend on the size of your agency. But each letter needs both a trained plain language writer and at least one subject matter expert. If the letter affects more than one part of your agency operation, make sure all programs are represented.

7. Set up a system for internally approving the letters

Decide who will be giving each document final approval, and keep them involved. You don't want to go through weeks of rewriting, only to discover the person with the final say has certain requirements or guidelines.

8. Find out if there are legal or programming issues

Will the document need an AG review? Will you need programming time to make the changes? Is the letter created on a specific template that has room for only so many words? Does it have only one font? Get your answers **before** you start writing.

9. Set deadlines

Decide which document – and how many – to rewrite first. Then set deadlines. You may want to first select the "no brainers" -- from which you can expect an immediate process improvement. A good way to stay on track is to plan to complete a certain number of letters every quarter. You may decide that some rewrites will take six months, or even a year, if they are large or involve complex issues.

Try tracking your projects with this format.

10. Look for ways to measure any success

If the program thinks it can save money or reduce follow-ups with a clearer document, get your baselines now, so you can measure successlater on.

11. Plan for usability tests with customers

Before you finalize your document, try it out with a group of actual customers. See if they can understand what you've written. Don't ask them how they "like" the document. Test them.

12. Provide ongoing staff mentoring and support

For more detailed information, click on the paper:

From gobbledygook to plain English: How a large state agency took on the bureaucratic form letter. (PDF format)

Example B
Developing a Plain Talk review "team"

The Department of Ecology doesn't send many documents in high volumes. But it sends many different messages to businesses and property owners. It decided to train a core team that is now available to help programs write and test documents.

Ecology's Plain Talk process

Service request form

Team interest application

Team member agreement form

Plain Talk team business cards

Example C
Revising letters to generate tax revenue

When customers understand the rules, they are more likely to comply — or, at the Department of Revenue, pay their taxes. DOR picked a few high volume letters with the goal of raising revenue and was highly successful.

How Department of Revenue's Straight Talk raised revenue

DOR's style guide

Guidelines

Ready to begin "Plain Talking" your documents? Here are a few simple and proven guidelines to follow.

1. Understand customer needs

2. Use simple language

3. Include only important information

4. Keep sentences and paragraphs short

5. Use active sentences. Who is responsible?

6. Use personal pronouns such as "we" and "you"

7. Design clear pages

1. Understand customer needs

People read government documents because they have something very specific they must do or find. If the document is confusing, too long, or they simply cannot find what they need to do the task, they will usually:

- Set it aside or throw it away – Requiring you to contact them again.
- Hurry to get through it – Causing them to make mistakes that cost you time.
- Phone your office – Requiring more of your and your customer's time.
- Complain – Requiring you to reply, sometimes for an elected official.

Pay attention to the document when you are creating it, and you will avoid these problems. Before writing a word, find out:

1. What information your customers want most
2. What information they need to easily perform the task they must do.

You can get this information in different ways:

Ask your staff:
The front desk and hotline staffs of state agencies know what questions customers ask, and what tends to confuse.

Do a field study:
Have you ever visited your typical customers in their own environment? You can learn a lot just by watching them deal with your paperwork. Who handles it? How much other paperwork are they trying to cope with? What are their routines like?

Conduct usability tests:
Give your written materials a reality check. Recruit a half-dozen typical customers and schedule them to take a short test. Can they follow your instructions correctly or answer basic questions about your document without help? Usability tests are ***not*** focus groups, in which customers are asked for their opinions. Instead, usability testing seeks to find out if the document (or web site) can be easily "used" by the customer.

2. Use simple language

Our customers are busy people who aren’t familiar with state agency jargon. Use simple, straightforward words that most people in the community understand. This isn’t “dumbing down.” It’s a common-sense approach used increasingly by many top financial experts, lawyers, teachers and business owners.

Avoid Jargon

It’s ok to use your organization’s jargon when you’re with your colleagues. Try it at your family barbecue and watch your relatives fall asleep. You don’t want this to happen to your customers. Give them the courtesy of a clear explanation.

<u>Before:</u>

> "When the provider notifies us that you are fixed and stable, the industrial insurance claim will close."

<u>After:</u>

> "We will close your claim when your doctors tell us your medical condition is stable and they do not expect any further improvement."

<u>Before:</u>

> Under the statute of limitations, the current timeframe that is open to audit or making tax adjustments is from January 1, 1998 through the year 2002.

<u>After:</u>

> We cannot give refunds or change your tax bill for business conducted before January 1, 1998. (Our statute of limitations is four years plus the current year.)

<u>Before:</u>

> "In general, full accreditation is awarded for those parameters for which the two most recent PT results, if applicable, were rated ‘Acceptable’."

<u>After:</u>

> Ecology will award you full accreditation if your two most recent, applicable PT results were rated "Acceptable."

Don't turn your verbs into nouns

When you turn a strong verb into a noun (a nominalization), your sentence becomes longer and harder to understand. Use verbs (action words) instead of nouns (things) or adjectives (descriptive words).

Don't	Do
Animal shelters are the recipients of funding from grants and donations. (11 words)	Animal shelters receive funding from grants and donations. (8 words)
They did not give an explanation for the mistake. (9 words)	They did not explain their mistake. (6 words)
A decision has been made regarding a reduction in lunch room fees. (12 words)	Jim has decided to reduce lunchroom fees. (7 words)

Be careful with acronym use:

If you must use an acronym, spell it out when you first use it.

Example:
Fill out your Independent Medical Exam (IME) form right away. IME's must be sent within two weeks to your claim manager.

Note: Try to keep your pages free of numerous acronyms or repeats of the same acronym. A page that is peppered with capital letters is a page that does not get read.

Use effective words, not bland, confusing words:

Effective words are familiar, active and to-the-point. Writing that gets respect - and gets read - is surprisingly simple and free of bureaucratic words.

Don't	Do
Terminate	End
Cease	Stop
Remit	Pay
Initiate	Start
Implement	Carry out
Utilize	Use
Prior to	Before
Procure	Get
Retain	Keep

3. Include only important information

Summarize your message by giving your customers only the essential information they need, in the order they are likely to use it. Put the most important information on the top of the page. Don't bury it under introductory material, becuase most readers won't make it that far.

Important information :	Why you are writing What the customer is required to do Deadline Where to send How much to pay
Ask yourself if these are important :	Why you have this policy How this policy has changed Penalties for not responding Complete text of RCW or WAC

Make sure your information is in a **logical order**. If you are writing instructions, for example, list the tasks in the order the customer must do them. If you are explaining something, explain the broader picture first, then build on it with the details.

Plain Talk Tip:

Organize instructions by task, in the order they must be done:

<u>Before:</u>

> Warning: Completion required.
>
> The department, before releasing warrant for services rendered, requires completion of Form 1038d regarding submission of correct Soc. Sec. # and place of residence.

<u>After:</u>

> Before we can send your check:
>
> 1. Put the following on the enclosed form:
>
> Your Social Security Number
> Your address
> Your signature

2. Mail the completed form to:

Government Department
P.O. Box 100
Seattle, WA 98000

3. Send it to us by: Dec. 30, 2003

You should receive your check with 30 days.

4. Keep sentences and paragraphs short

Short sentences, each containing a single thought, are easier to read than long sentences that cover two or more subjects. Even very short sentences are possible.

Example:

Is this a bill?
No. It is proof that you have paid your overdue bill.

Try to keep your sentences to 20-25 words and your paragraphs to three or four sentences. This is especially important when you are giving a customer instructions. Focus on *what* they must do, and in what order, *not why* they must do it.

This approach will create smaller chunks of information. Customers will be looking at a more inviting, welcoming page.

Before and after examples:

Before:

> Department stakeholders who have relevant issues to raise in our regular Wednesday meetings should verbally communicate their interest to us

After:

> Let us know if you would like to speak at our Wednesday meeting.

Before:

> The implementation of the Director's management reorganization will be coordinated by the department's Human Resources Director, Linda Green and her subordinate staff.

After:

> Linda Green will coordinate the director's management reorganization.

5. Use active sentences. Who is responsible?

This is a passive sentence: A decision was made to reject John's claim.

This is an active sentence: Mary decided to reject John's claim.

Do you see how the verb "decide" was turned into a noun, "decision"? This did two things: 1) We lost track of who decided (Mary) and 2) It made the sentence longer.

Government writing is usually full of passive sentences that are impersonal and do not make it clear who is responsible for what.

Before:

The conclusion of the budget meeting took place at noon.

After:

We completed the budget meeting at noon.

Before:

The demotion of Mr. Hill took place on Friday.

After:

I demoted Mr. Hill on Friday.

6. Use personal pronouns such as "we" and "you"

Help readers understand how they fit into the message. Use words like “I, me, our, ours, you, yours.” Try referring to your agency as “we” and the customer as “you.”

Notice the difference:

Before:

> The Department of General Administration will send all applicants for Administrative Assistant II positions a brochure explaining the job selection process.

After:

> We will send you a brochure explaining our job selection process.

This worked because we already knew “The Department of General Administration” was sending the letter because it was on the letterhead. It wasn’t necessary to include “Applicants for Administrative Assistant II positions” because this message was only sent to this group of people.

More examples:

Before:

> By this notice, demand is hereby made for you to exercise your right of election pursuant to RCW 51.24.070.

After:

> This is our formal demand for you to give us your decision.

Before:

> The submitted variance application has been accepted.

After:

> I have accepted your application for a variance.

Before:

> To facilitate the implementation of the new policy changes we reviewed, an informal meeting will be scheduled to discuss our options.

After:

> I will schedule a meeting to discuss our policy changes.

7. Design clear pages

Make it easy for your customer to scan the page to find out what your message is all about. Research has shown that four out of five people will scan the page first, to see if the message applies to them. You can help them search by creating bulleted lists or chunks of information with boldface headings.

- Use lists and tables whenever possible.
- Create wide margins
- Boldface your headings, so they can be easily scanned.

Before:

> Before we can process your application, we will need you to forward us a copy of your birth certificate, your Social Security number, a copy of your college transcript, a photocopy of your passport and vaccination records.

After:

> Please enclose with your application:
>
> 1. Birth certificate
> 2. Social Security number
> 3. College transcripts
> 4. Passport photocopy
> 5. Vaccination records

Before-and-After Examples

Here are some real-life examples of how Washington state agencies took a stand against bureaucratic documents that confused their customers.

- Appeal rights for companies cited for workplace safety violations (L&I) –
  - Before
  - After
- Instructions to cited drivers about avoiding license suspension (DOL) –
  - Before
  - After
- Reminder to businesses of unpaid taxes (DOR) –
  - Before
  - After
- Instructions to customers about completing paperwork (L&I) –
  - Before
  - After
- Instructions to citizens who've lost benefit checks (L&I) –
  - Before
  - After
- Response to citizen request for public records (L&I) –
  - Before
  - After
- Instructions to injured workers who overpaid pharmacists (L&I) –
  - Before
  - After
- Account deliquency letter to business (L&I) –
  - Before
  - After
- Guidance document for groups that must complete a Integrated Aquatic Vegetative Management Plan (DOE) –
  - Before
  - After

Plain Talk leads: Do you have before-and-after examples for our site? Send them to botd235@LNI.wa.gov in PDF format.

Tools and Resources

Plain Talk agency leads: Contact List

Plain Talk training

DOP PLAIN TALK TRAINING FINAL, July 2005

The Department of Personnel will be announcing dates for open plain language classes beginning Fall 2005. (Classes will begin in July through DOP, but are reserved for Plain Talk leads or their designee only. These classes will be held July 14-15, July 20-21 and July 27-28).

Writing a Plain Talk document

Creating a Plain English Document, Step-by-Step: A short guide to the steps you must take to write your plain language document. Written especially for this web site by L&I staffer Catherine Julian, co-author of The Complete Idiot's Guide to Technical Writing, Alpha Books, 2001.

A Plain English Handbook: This excellent 83-page handbook, produced by the federal Securities and Exchange Commission, gives corporations a short guide to planning and carrying out a plain language project. Its purpose is to make sure ordinary citizens can understand a company prospectus. But the principles apply to government writing as well.

Usability testing

A usability test can show you how a typical customer "uses" your document. Can they follow your instructions? Do they understand the language you are using?

1. This page from the Usability Professional's Association's site is a good reference for those just learning about usability testing.

2. This paper outlines how the WA Department of Labor and Industries conducted usability tests on many of its revised documents. From Gobbledygook to Plain English - How a large state agency took on the bureaucratic form letter.

Washington Department of Ecology's Plain Talk website

Plain language organizations

1. **PLAIN**: The federal government's plain language organization. This newly renovated web site contains many useful tips and resources.
2. **Clarity International**, an organization devoted to clear writing and plain language for lawyers.

3. **Society for Technical Communication**: The 25,000-member international organization that serves most non-fiction/business writers. Currently, it is focused on web matters, but this site also provides resources, training and information for document writers and their issues.

Benefits of plain language

Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please, is Professor Joseph Kimbel's compilation of reports from businesses and government agencies that have saved money and time after rewriting documents into plain language. Published in the Scribes Journal of Legal Writing.

Style Guides

Washington Department of Revenue's Straight Talk Style Guide

The Elements of Style, by Strunk and White: William Strunk Junior's 1918 classic in its entirety, with an introduction by E.B. White. Have a question about usage or style? Need to check out a commonly misused word or expression? Chances are, you will find your answer here.